

Michael Moore, Union Advocate

ST. PAUL - Federal lawmakers tossed struggling state and local governments a lifeline this week, as Democratic majorities pushed through emergency legislation, signed by President Obama Wednesday, that will preserve the jobs of thousands of teachers, firefighters, cops and nurses across the country.

Dubbed an "emergency jobs bill," the legislation provides \$26.1 billion to help states fix their budget deficits without slashing public jobs. For Minnesota, it means \$448 million to offset budget cuts agreed to by Gov. Tim Pawlenty and the Legislature in May.

With 75 percent of school districts across the country set to open the school year at lower staffing levels than last year, the emergency measure devotes \$10 billion to rehiring laid-off teachers, retaining teachers who might otherwise be laid off and keeping class sizes small.

Supporters estimate it will save roughly 160,000 teaching jobs, including 2,800 in Minnesota.

The legislation also includes \$16.1 billion in health assistance for states struggling with fiscal crises - budget relief that, in turn, will create or save 158,000 jobs in law enforcement and the private sector nationwide, proponents like Rep. Betty McCollum of Minnesota's 4th Congressional District say.

"This is a jobs bill that will keep 161,000 teachers - including 2,800 Minnesota jobs - in the classroom rather than in the unemployment line," McCollum said. "This is a bill that prevents thousands of first responders who are protecting our communities today from losing their jobs tomorrow."

To cover the cost of saving those jobs, Congress closed a loophole in the corporate tax code that encourages companies to ship American jobs overseas. As a result, the bill not only is deficit neutral, but it will reduce the federal budget deficit by \$1.4 billion over the next decade, according to the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office.

Support for the emergency jobs bill fell largely along party lines, with nearly every House Republican voting "no" - including Minnesota's Michele Bachmann and John Kline. Republicans characterized the bill as a handout for special interests.

But are the firefighters, police officers and teachers whose jobs the bill saves really special interests? Their unions don't think so.

Paul Mueller, vice president of Education Minnesota, the statewide teachers union, said the legislation "greatly benefits students by keeping more teachers in the classroom and preventing class sizes from expanding any further."

The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the powerful public employees union, generated more than 60,000 phone calls nationwide on behalf of the legislation.

Congress got the message - despite being in its annual August recess. Democratic leaders called the House of Representatives back into session to consider and vote on the emergency assistance package.

McCollum said she hopes the vote becomes a "litmus test" for this fall's general election, indicating to voters whether their representatives in Washington are on the side of teachers, first responders and other public servants - or on the side of big corporations seeking to move more American jobs offshore.

"This is a vote for jobs and for our children's future," McCollum said. "This is a vote that will expose Republicans as either defenders of jobs or as nothing more than a party that cuts taxes for the rich, protects Wall Street executives and is willing to throw 161,000 public school teachers out on the street while our children suffer."

It's clear which side Bachmann is on, and at least one political-advocacy group said it plans on reminding voters in the 6th Congressional District of her vote on the emergency jobs bill during the campaign.

Americans United for Change, a grassroots and media advocacy group founded to challenge conservative voices, called out Bachmann, a darling of the right-wing talk shows, immediately after the Aug. 10 vote.

"Talk about sending the wrong message to struggling Minnesota families: 'yes' to corporate tax loopholes and more deficit-ballooning Bush tax cuts for the richest 1 percent, but 'no' to saving the jobs of hundreds of thousands of educators and first responders?" said Tom McMahon, Executive Director of Americans United for Change. "Rep. Bachmann needs to seriously reevaluate her priorities because Minnesota workers seem to be at the bottom of her list."

Michael Moore edits The Union Advocate, the official publication of the St. Paul Regional Labor Federation. Learn more at www.stpaulunions.org